Kimler Studio, Chicago. Photograph by KC Clarke.

The Zoo Entrance: The Poet, the Institution, and No Exit

KC Clarke

For a generation or two, the absorption of poetry into universities and the related workshops, magazines, archives, prizes, and professional literary systems has been treated as though it were inevitable. Perhaps it was inevitable, or seemed so. The twentieth century and the early twenty-first century built institutions around nearly every form of artistic life. It professionalized the arts, expanded higher education in the arts, created systems of funding and prestige, and gave poetry rooms it had rarely possessed at that scale before.

What seems inevitable can still be strange. Poetry reached this condition early. Other arts are now facing their own versions of it. The institution begins as host, then becomes credentialing body, then becomes archive, then becomes gate, then begins to imagine itself as the field. The art enters the room for shelter and support. Over time, the room begins to speak as though the art belongs to it.

Poetry was particularly vulnerable to this absorption because it builds with language. No studio, kiln, orchestra, camera, foundry, rehearsal space, or expensive equipment required. A poet can make it anywhere. And because poetry is portable, unruly, and difficult to contain, institutions were able to offer the poet something powerful: legitimacy, context, publication, employment, preservation, and a place inside the ivory tower. The offer was real, and so was the cost.

The CIA enters the story too. During the Cold War, American writing could be presented as evidence of democratic freedom: individual, expressive, plural, anti-doctrinal, and artistically open in contrast to Soviet cultural control. Iowa became a major part of that story. The Iowa Writers' Workshop, formally established in 1936, became the dominant model for creative writing as a degree-bearing discipline, and under Paul Engle, Iowa's broader writing enterprise became increasingly tied to international cultural diplomacy. In 1967, Engle received money from the Farfield Foundation, a CIA front connected to the Congress for Cultural Freedom, to support international writing at the University of Iowa. The stated value was artistic freedom. The result was more complicated: the freedom of writing became linked to programs, funding channels, credentialing structures, and American cultural power.

Structure matters more here than conspiracy. Creative writing entered the machinery of American institutional power at the same moment that higher education, federal policy, Cold War cultural strategy, and professional credentialing were expanding together. A system partly justified by freedom helped create the conditions by which literary freedom became institutionally managed.

That machinery also supported poetry. It created jobs, workshops, magazines, students, archives, fellowships, reading series, and serious conditions for study. Many poets benefited from it. I benefited from it. Over time, it narrowed the imagination. A historically recent institutional formation began to act as though its definition of poetry were natural.

I came through graduate study in English and creative writing when poets were already naming this narrowing. When I entered the master's program at Miami University in 1992, it had not yet become an MFA. The program still carried a hybrid structure: literary criticism, theory, tradition, and creative writing held in the same room. That mattered. The poet was still being formed in relation to literature as a long argument, not only as a professional practice.

At the time, there were roughly fifty MFA programs in creative writing in the United States, close to one per state as a matter of scale. Today there are nearly two hundred, closer to four per state. The expansion was already visible then, and poets were already arguing about it. From 1992 through 1994, when I was in graduate school, there was real disdain for what people called “workshop poetry.” I often found that disdain insulting. It sounded like older poets looking down their noses at younger poets trying to find their way. Still, the concern was real. Many poets believed they were already watching the art become more managed, more legible, and more alike. It is recent. It is powerful. It is only one arrangement in a much older art.

Poetry did not begin in the workshop, the MFA program, the faculty appointment, the prize system, the literary magazine, or the peer-reviewed grammar of professional prestige. It moved through ritual, song, memory, court, marketplace, prayer, theater, tavern, field, street, book, broadsheet, newspaper, parlor, schoolroom, battlefield, prison, public square, kitchen table, website, and solitary notebook. The contemporary American poetry apparatus is one late arrangement among many. It may support poetry, preserve poetry, train poets, publish, hire, review, and archive them. The full life of the art remains larger.

At that scale, the working artist stops looking anomalous. The anomaly is the system that made the working artist look anomalous.

The working artist is ordinary in the history of poetry. The poet with another job. The poet in another profession. The poet organizing readings. The poet making rooms. The poet writing across decades outside a credentialed sequence. The poet whose work comes from civic life, private discipline, local speech, religious pressure, political rupture, family memory, music, labor, illness, war, friendship, grief, accident, stubbornness, and duration. The poet who enters the field carrying the work of a life rather than the marks of institutional formation.

The working artist brings the work forward without waiting for the institution to confer seriousness. The work either bears seriousness or it does not. No committee can add what the artist has failed to build, and no enclosure can subtract what the artist has achieved through duration.

The contemporary apparatus often has difficulty reading that figure. It recognizes pathways more easily than work. It knows how to read the MFA, the fellowship, the journal, the prize, the residency, the appointment, the conference, the blurb, the network, the sanctioned introduction. Increasingly, it also knows how to read the poet’s social position, declared affiliations, public gestures, approved causes, and visible forms of institutional belonging. The poet arrives less as an artist than as an applicant.

Even credentials can participate in the narrowing. I am, literally, an award-winning poet. The award was given by the university where I earned my master’s degree in

English. That statement is true. It is also immediately distorting. The moment I write it, attention shifts from the art to the recognition the art received. The poem becomes evidence of institutional validation before it becomes an object of encounter.

Awards can honor real work. The subtler danger is credentialing itself. Credentialing changes the order of attention. It teaches the reader to ask who has recognized the work before asking what the work is doing. The certificate arrives before the poem.

The submission ritual is another anomaly. The contemporary poet is expected to send individual poems, again and again, to magazines across the country, often obsessively, while waiting for a very low rate of acceptance. One poem here, two poems there, months of silence, a polite rejection, a small victory, another round of submission. Unless the poet already has an established name, this becomes one of the primary ways the work is made legible. The poem must first be accepted in fragments before the larger work can be received as a book.

That structure is now familiar enough to seem natural. Historically, it is strange. The poet first appears less as the maker of an art object than as a sender of specimens. The magazine becomes the testing site. The acceptance becomes proof of viability. Enough proofs gathered over time may then become permission to publish a book.

This reverses an older relation between poet, work, and public. In earlier arrangements, a poet might make a chapbook, pamphlet, broadside, sequence, or book, and that made object would enter the world as the primary encounter. The public received the work as a body, however modest, local, handmade, or imperfect. The art object arrived first. The credentials, if any, followed later.

The modern submission system often reverses that order. The poet sends fragments into dispersed editorial rooms, gathers small permissions, then uses those permissions to justify the whole. The book, which should be the art object, arrives already preceded by the record of acceptance. Again, credentialing changes the order of attention. The certificate arrives before the poem.

In the prestige economy of contemporary poetry, being a poet can feel less like practicing an art than applying to an elite school. The poem arrives with an admissions packet: the right magazines, the right programs, the right mentors, the right fellowships, the right gestures of social engagement, the right lineage, the right affiliations, the right evidence of seriousness. The work itself is still present, but it is increasingly surrounded by proofs of belonging.

Social conscience, publication, study, mentorship, and lineage all matter. But when they become prerequisites for recognition, they begin to function less as artistic context than as institutional screening. The poet is asked to demonstrate fitness for the room before the room has fully encountered the poem.

Poetry, an art form historically associated with rupture, risk, song, witness, strangeness, dissent, prayer, seduction, grief, satire, and formal disobedience, begins to reward the poet who can signal disruption without actually disrupting the institution that grants recognition. The boat may be named. It may be analyzed. It may even be denounced. But the poet is rarely welcomed if the poet actually rocks it.

The poet outside the sanctioned sequence is often treated as amateur. The poet inside the sequence is treated as serious. Missing from this arrangement is the older, wider figure of the working artist.

The painter in the studio is allowed to be a working artist. The painter may post work in progress, announce a show, speak with collectors, argue with critics, cultivate a gallery, defend the work, sell the work, and claim public standing without apologizing for the gesture. These behaviors belong to the ecology of the art. The artist advocates because the work has a public life.

Poetry often treats the same behavior differently. The poet who advocates directly for the work can be coded as needy, self-promoting, amateur, or insufficiently selected. The poet may be promoted, but should not appear to promote. The poet may be reviewed, but should not frame the work too strongly. The poet may have a career, but should act as though the career descended through grace. The poet may be ambitious, but preferably after being chosen. That is not modesty. It is a system of manners.

The real issue is space. A living art requires room for the artist to move before the field has decided how to classify the movement. Poetry should be treated like art. Art made from language, pressure, music, silence, image, structure, and risk.

Poetry is art constructed from human language, and human language is charged material. It carries law, prayer, insult, lullaby, command, seduction, memory, error, inheritance, violence, music, and silence. To make art from language is to work inside a sacred and contested space. Institutions enter that space without owning it. Credentialing systems, magazines, theories, and moral grammars touch part of it. The whole stays unstable. The poem remains dangerous because language remains dangerous.

The poem is not a prompt awaiting academic completion. Its thinking has already occurred in the labor of construction: in the pressure of syntax, the architecture of rhythm, the weight of silence, and the deployment of form. The working artist locates intellect in the making itself.

Judgment still matters. There is marvelous rhyming poetry and marvelous free verse. There is great poetry in many languages, traditions, forms, and registers. There is also an enormous amount of weak poetry: sloppy, sentimental, half-made, derivative, amateur, poetry that mistakes feeling for form or intention for art. That too belongs to

the field. An art form with no base has no height. Practice, failure, imitation, awkward devotion, untrained intensity, and work that never becomes accomplished still keep the art in circulation.

Judgment remains necessary. Containment does not. Every accomplished poet has poems they once loved and later outgrew. Apprenticeship leaves artifacts. Some of them are poems.

The academy helped create much of the current condition, and simple blame misses the shape of the problem. Poetry became deeply shaped by a professional language. The academy opened doors, created jobs, supported workshops, sponsored journals, gave poets students, stipends, offices, audiences, sabbaticals, archives, and communities. These gains were real.

Donald Hall once described poets as having entered the university through the "zoo entrance." The phrase is funny because it is humiliating, and accurate because it catches the original arrangement. The poet entered the university as an oddity rather than a central intellectual figure. The poet arrived as a creature of practice, temperament, appetite, song, and unruly speech, useful to the institution but only partly trusted by it.

At first, that side entrance may have felt like a victory. The university gave poets salaries, students, offices, workshops, libraries, health insurance, time, and a place to survive. It made space for a figure who had often lived precariously at the edge of cultural seriousness. But over time, the zoo entrance became something else. It became an entrance without an exit.

The poet who entered through the side door found that the institution offered shelter and built an enclosure. The poet could teach, publish, mentor, attend conferences, serve on committees, direct programs, pursue grants, and participate in the sanctioned life of the field. But the terms of seriousness increasingly belonged to the institution. The poet could move inside the enclosure, sometimes with real freedom, sometimes with real distinction, but the surrounding structure became harder to leave.

That is the deeper irony. A system that began by giving poets access eventually began to define access itself. The zoo entrance became the main entrance, then the preferred entrance, then the entrance whose absence made the working artist look suspect. What began as accommodation became credential. What began as shelter became habitat.

The enclosure also created new forms of power among poets themselves. Once poetry's professional life moved deeply into the university, department chairs, senior faculty, committees, favored deputies, and internal alliances began to shape the conditions under which poets lived and worked. They could affect teaching loads, hiring, promotion, course assignments, readings, visiting writers, graduate admissions, internal

prestige, and the general atmosphere in which a poet's work was received. Administrative power became literary weather.

Poets are not exempt from ordinary human conflict. They wound, compete, resent, misread, retaliate, dramatize, form alliances, protect lovers, punish enemies, and remember slights. That is human. The danger begins when those conflicts gain access to institutional authority. A personal fight becomes a committee matter. A grievance becomes a personnel question. A feud becomes an ethical finding. A rivalry becomes policy. The institution then speaks in the language of fairness while carrying forward the private weather of the people inside it.

Anyone who has worked in a university, nonprofit, agency, corporation, or public institution will recognize the pattern. Two parties are in conflict. One party has better access to authority. The institution then asks that party, or that party's allies, to interpret the conflict, document the conflict, adjudicate the conflict, or recommend what should happen next. The result may wear the clothing of process, but the structure is already compromised. It is like asking one combatant to write the history of the war while the war is still being fought.

One quiet cost of the zoo entrance becoming an entrance without an exit is this: the poet enters the university for shelter, salary, students, library, and time. Then the poet discovers that the same structure also produces supervisors, rivalries, committees, grievance, dependency, punishment, preference, and institutional fear. The poet may still write freely at the desk. But the life around the desk is no longer free in the same way.

Another quiet cost of the zoo entrance is the loss of poets who cannot, or will not, learn the manners of the enclosure. The brawling poet born in streets and bars. The uncultured poet who does not know the etiquette of the reception. The awkward poet who cannot perform institutional ease. The rough poet whose intelligence arrives without polish. The local poet who speaks from work, grief, hunger, faith, anger, drink, illness, labor, military service, family violence, public duty, or some other pressure the room has not learned to honor. Such poets may be praised in retrospect, once safely dead or converted into lineage, but in life they are often treated as problems of tone.

Institutions try to correct this. They can create programs, fellowships, initiatives, reading series, diversity efforts, access points, and new categories of inclusion. Some of that work is necessary, and some of it has opened doors that should have been open all along. Administrative category cannot keep up with human unruliness. Equity and inclusion, when handled only as institutional management, will always lag behind the actual range of human experience. The field is larger than the taxonomy.

Inclusion matters. It becomes something else when it is administered as containment. The institution may widen its doorway, but it still remains a doorway. It still has

etiquette, forms, applications, committees, rubrics, acceptable vocabularies, preferred narratives, and recognizable modes of arrival. The poet who does not fit those modes may remain outside even when the institution believes it has expanded.

Inclusion has opened doors that should have been open all along. Administered through credentialing, however, it still leaves the credentialing system intact. It may change who is admitted, and sometimes that change is necessary. But it does not fully answer the deeper artistic question: why must the poet arrive as an applicant at all?

Poetry's older life was rougher than that. It included court poets and scholars, but also drunks, prophets, ranters, singers, satirists, mystics, amateurs, printers, laborers, prisoners, soldiers, preachers, lovers, fools, and people who would have been terrible at a departmental reception.

Poets can do beautiful, necessary work in universities. The danger begins when the university turns poets into departmental subjects. Once that happens, artistic authority becomes entangled with administrative standing. The poem still exists, but the poet's life is mediated by the internal politics of the enclosure.

Training and formatting are different things. Training gives an artist tools. Formatting gives an artist manners. The modern creative writing system did not destroy poetry. It professionalized poetry's conditions of speech.

The result is a field in which the language of seriousness often arrives before the poem. The poet learns the acceptable vocabulary. The poet learns the sanctioned posture. The poet learns which risks are legible as risk, which disruptions are already approved as disruptions, which forms of difficulty can be taught, and which forms of difficulty will be treated as failure. The poet learns how to sound like the room before entering it.

Here the academy begins to resemble a corporation. Universities and corporations differ, but both can produce a handbook language. Both can develop preferred vocabularies, values statements, advancement rituals, internal grammars of belonging, and penalties for tonal deviation. The approved language changes by decade. The subjects change, the slogans change, the required acknowledgments change, the moral posture changes. What remains stable is the organizational demand itself: speak in the language of the institution before the institution will recognize the seriousness of the work.

That is not how artists think. It is how institutions protect themselves from artists.

The artist needs room to maneuver. The artist needs the capacity to move sideways, withhold, contradict, fail, return, and speak from positions the group has not yet named. Institutions seek alignment. Artists need maneuver.

I learned this in small ways before I had language for it. At that time, a friend of mine was in the MFA program at Indiana. We both had workshops. We began swapping poems. I would put my name on his poem and take it into my workshop. He would put his name on mine and take it into his. The point was access rather than advancement. There was nothing to win. The point was another room, another set of readers, another field of assumptions. We wanted to hear what happened when the poem entered a different workshop without the biographical and social knowledge attached to its maker. It was a small act of artistic mischief, but also a real method. The poem moved. The room changed. The work came back altered by another kind of attention.

That small exchange exposed something durable. The workshop claims to read the poem, but often reads the poet, the room, the known temperament, the expected development, the social position, and the teacher's prior sense of the student. By changing the name at the top, we let the poem travel briefly as an object. We gave it room to move outside its assigned frame. A healthy poetry needs more of that kind of movement, not less.

The older modern poets understood this. Eliot worked in a bank. Stevens worked in insurance. Williams practiced medicine. Cavafy worked as a civil servant. Niedecker lived outside the main literary circuits. Their lives were not pure. No artist's life is pure. But their poetic authority did not depend entirely on passing through one professional literary gate. They had tethers outside poetry's own self-enclosed world.

The working artist may be as radical as the pure artist. Sometimes the tether preserves the danger of the work. Eliot, the banker, lived inside a stabilizing structure while writing poems that helped unsettle the century. Pound, devoted more wholly to poetry and the mission of art, helped create modernism's conditions and then drifted toward totalizing cultural fantasy and political ruin. The comparison makes neither Eliot pure nor Pound merely cautionary. It shows something less comfortable: the artist's life outside art can keep the art in friction with reality. The artist needs contact with a world that is not already organized as art. The working artist can work with institutions while refusing to let them become the only source of artistic being.

In my own case, the working artist is also an active member of the law enforcement community with a badge, a statutory role, and the authority to seek search warrants, enter homes, and seize animals from people accused of neglect or abuse. That sounds like the wrong credential for a poet inside the contemporary prestige economy. It sits outside the familiar packet: MFA, journal sequence, fellowship, residency, sanctioned cause, sanctioned biography, sanctioned form of public tenderness.

That experience belongs inside poetry's field. It places a person directly inside language, law, suffering, evidence, judgment, mercy, authority, injury, custody, and moral consequence. It requires written affidavits, sworn statements, public responsibility,

restraint, and the handling of living beings under extreme conditions. It is civic work in the raw. If poetry is art made from human language, then the language of warrants, testimony, care, cruelty, seizure, custody, and responsibility belongs to the contested human field from which poems are made. The apparatus often welcomes the language of justice more readily than the burden of public duty.

The same is true of military history and public memory. A proper poet, in the eyes of the prestige apparatus, is rarely imagined as someone deeply formed by military affairs, military collections, combat history, veterans' testimony, or the public record of war. That belongs inside poetry's field too.

At the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, I helped build a collection from roughly 50,000 works to roughly 100,000 works. I worked with historians, combat journalists turned historians, novelists, artists, curators, veterans, archivists, exhibit designers, public television producers, and scholars whose work moved through war, testimony, memory, violence, state power, sacrifice, error, witness, and grief. The institution held books, paintings, letters, uniforms, maps, artifacts, oral histories, exhibits, broadcasts, and public arguments. It was a house of language and consequence. And yet, to the literary world around it, it barely counted.

It was an institution built around books, history, witness, contradiction, public memory, and the human record under pressure. Its stacks held poets and soldiers, memoirists and historians, journalists and artists, official accounts and dissenting accounts, noble speech and ruined speech. Nothing in that place fully agreed with anything else. It was unruly in the deepest sense. It contained argument, evidence, beauty, propaganda, mourning, courage, cruelty, silence, and the long aftermath of human action.

But because it did not arrive inside the literary world's preferred credentialing frame, it was treated as if it belonged somewhere else. It sat outside the familiar literary categories: MFA program, little magazine, poetry foundation, fashionable archive of approved literary difficulty. It was a civic institution organized around military history and public memory, and for that reason it remained largely invisible to the poetry world around it.

That invisibility reveals the problem. The apparatus often claims to value witness, history, trauma, public language, political consequence, moral complexity, and contested memory. When those things appear outside the sanctioned literary frame, they often fail to register as poetry's business. The rhetoric of witness counts. The institution of witness does not.

The blindness showed up publicly. Newcity published its Lit 50 list every year, naming people who shaped literary life in Chicago. During my years at the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, the institution built one of the most serious public literary programs in the city by any practical measure. We hosted historians, novelists, combat

journalists, memoirists, poets, artists, veterans, scholars, and public intellectuals. We built collections, produced programs, mounted exhibits, recorded conversations, and placed books at the center of public memory.

And yet it never seemed to register as literary life. Not once, as I remember it, did that work enter the city's ordinary literary recognition system. It did not fit the map. It was not a university writing program, a poetry organization, a small press, a bookstore, a magazine, or a foundation. It was a military museum and library, which meant the literary world could treat it as if it belonged to another category altogether.

The contradiction was plain. I was nominated for an Emmy for hosting *The Fiction of War*, a public television program with Karl Marlantes and Tim O'Brien. The conversation centered on war, fiction, memory, experience, and the transformation of lived violence into narrative art. Marlantes and O'Brien were not marginal literary figures. They were major writers whose fiction is inseparable from their experience as soldiers and from the moral pressure of war. The program was literary by any meaningful standard. It treated fiction as witness, craft, memory, burden, and art. But even that did not make the work count inside the city's literary credentialing imagination.

This is what I mean by the narrowing of poetry and literary culture. The literary world had intelligence. Its map had become too small. It knew how to recognize literary activity when it appeared in sanctioned literary rooms. It had more difficulty recognizing literary activity when it appeared inside a civic institution devoted to military history, public memory, and the records of human conflict.

A proper literary figure, in that system, seemed to require the right kind of room around them. The work could involve books, writers, archives, public programs, television, fiction, war, witness, memory, and art. But if the room was wrong, the work became illegible.

This is one reason I have often found my strongest affiliations outside poetry's sanctioned rooms. I have gravitated toward novelists like Cormac McCarthy, painters like Wesley Kimler and Ed Paschke, and toward music, especially punk and post-punk, because those fields have often seemed to permit a larger range of exploration. They have often been more open to force, contradiction, strangeness, abrasion, humor, damage, refusal, and forms of beauty that do not need to arrive already credentialed. Their institutions can be corrupt or restrictive too, but the rooms have often felt larger.

The Wesley Kimler painting on the cover of my book is there for that reason. It is a sign of affiliation, not an ornament. It marks a belief that art can still happen in spaces wider than the narrow rooms poetry sometimes builds for itself. The cover does not turn the book away from poetry. It turns poetry back toward art.

I have never experienced those affiliations as departures from poetry. They have felt more like returns to a larger artistic atmosphere in which poetry is one art among others, rather than a self-enclosed professional culture. McCarthy, Kimler, Paschke, punk, post-punk, public memory, civic institutions, the blues, galleries, archives, and reading series all belong to the same search for forms capable of carrying pressure without flattening it into approved speech. Some institutions create working conditions for artists. Others convert artists into institutional subjects.

I lived through one version of this in Chicago. The Poetry Center of Chicago occupied an increasingly difficult position between two forms of institutional power. On one side stood the writing program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, with its faculty culture, graduate students, workshop assumptions, and internal sense of what poetry should be. On the other side stood the transformation of *Poetry* Magazine after the Ruth Lilly gift, when a magazine-centered institution suddenly possessed resources large enough to alter the city's poetic ecology.

Those two pressures were different, but they rhymed. The writing program represented academic formation: the workshop, the degree, the department, the faculty, the internal grammar of seriousness. The *Poetry* windfall represented prestige consolidation: the magazine, the foundation, the archive, the prize, the large resource holder, the temptation to gather poetry around a central institution.

The Poetry Center stood between those forces. Its authority came from public occasion rather than degree sequence or editorial selection. It was a civic poetry institution rather than a school, magazine, archive, or foundation. It made rooms where poets appeared before audiences. That role may sound simple, but it exposed the problem. A public poetry institution can become illegible when the field is increasingly organized around either academic formation or prestige consolidation.

The pressure from the academic side was especially revealing. The writing program could never be fully appeased because its objections were not finally about this poet or that poet, this reading or that reading, this collaboration or that missed opportunity. The objections shifted because the underlying discomfort remained stable. The Poetry Center was a neighboring source of poetic authority that had not passed through the department's own system of permission.

Cooperation became strangely difficult. One faculty member might want more access to a visiting poet. Another might dislike the poet selected. Another might object to the aesthetic range of the series. Another might want the Poetry Center to reflect the department's current language of seriousness more visibly. Another might see public attention itself as a kind of rivalry. Each complaint could sound reasonable in isolation. Together, they formed an impossible demand: become public, but only in the manner

the department recognizes; serve the school, but do not behave as a source; expand poetry's audience, but remain subordinate to the workshop's grammar.

No civic poetry institution can survive that logic except by surrendering its reason for existing. It becomes less a center than a weather vane. The Poetry Center was being pressured to answer to departmental weather rather than to poetry's wider climate.

The local problem belonged to a national pattern. The writing program was part of a larger national consolidation of poetry inside the university structure. Creative writing had become professionalized through workshops, degrees, faculty appointments, journals, prizes, and conferences. Like any expanding professional system, it developed corporate habits: internal vocabularies, advancement rituals, preferred affiliations, acceptable forms of seriousness, and penalties for tonal deviation. The academy taught poetry while increasingly training poets to become legible within its own structure.

From the other side came prestige consolidation. After the Ruth Lilly gift, *Poetry* Magazine became something other than a magazine with a long history. It became the center of an institution with extraordinary resources. That changed the field around it. Money changes institutional imagination. It does not merely increase capacity. It changes what an institution believes it has the right to become.

Between these forces stood the Poetry Center. One side professionalized poetic formation. The other centralized poetic prestige. The Poetry Center's civic model did not fit either structure neatly. Poetry narrows when the workshop and the windfall become the dominant ways the art imagines public legitimacy. Civic institutions and working poets find few handholds there.

A magazine selects. A school trains. An archive preserves. A foundation funds. A civic poetry center places. These roles may overlap, but they are not the same role. When they collapse into one dominant institution, the field may become more centralized rather than stronger.

This history is treated more fully in *The Groaning Book: A Poetics*, the companion volume to *Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate*, especially in the section titled "The Asteroid." That record is not needed here. What matters for this essay is the pattern. A civic poetry institution was squeezed between academic formation on one side and prestige consolidation on the other. That does not make the Poetry Center unique. It makes it legible as part of a national change.

Artist-led forms often lose energy when they are absorbed. A form begins as an opening. It creates real opportunity because the relation between artist, audience, place, and risk is alive. Then the form becomes recognizable. Once recognizable, it becomes teachable. Once teachable, it becomes administrable. Once administrable, it often preserves the

format and removes the risk. A field begins as an opening and becomes an institution when its gestures become requirements.

The same pattern appears in visual art. Wesley Kimler's long fight against the institutionalization of visual art matters because it names the migration of authority away from artists and toward an institutional class trained to explain, certify, and manage art. Visual art resisted that migration longer than poetry did because it still preserved, however imperfectly, the figure of the working artist: the studio artist, the gallery artist, the artist with collectors, openings, critics, patrons, sales, arguments, and public presence.

Poetry absorbed its working-artist figure earlier and more quietly. By the time contemporary poetry became largely routed through the university, the workshop, the journal, the prize system, the fellowship, and the faculty appointment, the poet who advocated directly for the work could be made to look amateur. The poet who submitted to the sequence could be made to look serious. That is the false dynamic. The working artist disappeared from view.

The canon has not refreshed at the top in proportion to the expansion beneath it. The modern poetry apparatus has produced abundance: programs, journals, prizes, appointments, presses, conferences, readings, and a vast professional ecology. Abundance and renewal are different things. The poets who stood near the summit when I entered graduate study in 1992 still occupy much of that altitude: Strand, Glück, Jorie Graham, and the surrounding generation. The field expanded, but the symbolic summit did not truly turn over.

This is what happens when a recent system is allowed to speak for an ancient art. Systems built around recognition tend to reproduce recognizable forms. They can reward excellence, but they often have difficulty receiving work that has not already been formatted for recognition.

Poetry needs institutions. It suffers when one recent institutional formation mistakes itself for poetry's natural home. And this temptation is not limited to the academy.

Magazines do it. Foundations do it. Poetry centers do it. University archives do it. Rare books rooms do it. Museums do it. Any cultural institution can begin to confuse custody with centrality.

These institutions do serious work. Magazines publish poems. Foundations preserve archives, convene readers, support organizations, commission work, and create public rooms. University collections hold crucial manuscripts. Rare books rooms protect fragile artifacts. Poetry centers host readings and preserve memory. But no institution can become the definition of poetry.

However wealthy *Poetry* becomes, the art form remains larger. Poetry is too unruly for possession. It moves through books, voices, kitchens, classrooms, churches, bars, prisons, fields, bedrooms, archives, readings, songs, protests, jokes, prayers, elegies, graffiti, workshops, websites, and solitary notebooks. A magazine may publish part of it. A foundation may preserve part of it. A school may teach part of it. But the art exceeds every structure built to hold it. The mistake begins when stewardship becomes containment.

I learned this in another form at the Military Museum and Library. Some of the most important military memory I encountered was not held in one central institution, but scattered across base museums, local collections, unit archives, memorial rooms, and small repositories across the country. Each held fragments: uniforms, letters, maps, photographs, field objects, oral histories, plaques, damaged things, ordinary things, sacred things. The history exceeded every single museum. The meaning came from the tapestry.

Poetry is like that. Its life is dispersed across magazines, libraries, readings, classrooms, private notebooks, small presses, archives, community rooms, schools, bars, websites, recordings, and the memory of people who were there. A serious institution should understand itself as one node in that field, not the field itself. Poetry does not need a capital city.

Still, consolidation did not end poetry's civic life. It pushed it elsewhere. It scattered it into smaller rooms, local series, online archives, independent presses, hybrid books, performance spaces, community programs, personal websites, social media fragments, recordings, podcasts, classrooms outside the academy, and artists who learned to build their own frames because the central rooms had become too narrow.

Poetry did not die. Its ecology changed. The old centers still matter, but they no longer convincingly contain the field. The art has leaked around them.

The irony is that this institutional arrangement may already have reached its height. The system that made the working artist look anomalous now faces pressures of its own. The humanities have been under siege for years, not only from budgets and enrollment, but from a changed public climate. Social media helped drag academic language out of its rooms, flatten it into slogans, and make it available for political attack. Artificial intelligence now adds another pressure, unsettling the old relationship between writing, credential, and recognition. The rooms that once seemed permanent may prove more fragile than the art they tried to contain.

Purity is not the point. I am not outside the apparatus. I studied inside it, worked beside it, borrowed its rooms, built programs near it, benefited from its names, and helped normalize some of its public forms. I helped run an institution that made poetry public.

I also watched public forms become formats. Some of that was success. Some of it was absorption. The difference is rarely visible while one is doing the work.

There is no pure outside. The question is how to recognize when an apparatus that once created space begins to mistake itself for the field.

Institutions can host, pay, preserve, teach, publish, archive, and remember. They become dangerous when they forget their own historical partiality and begin to define the art itself. The field is healthiest when no single institution can plausibly imagine itself as the field.

A richer poetry would require proportion. The academy can teach without formatting every gesture of seriousness into its own language. Magazines can publish without imagining their pages as the center of the art. Archives can preserve without mistaking custody for possession. Poetry centers can make rooms rather than monuments to themselves.

Most of all, it would make room again for the working artist.

The working artist may teach. The working artist may organize. The working artist may work in a bank, practice medicine, run a shelter, carry a badge, build an archive, manage a museum, study war, host novelists, produce public television, paint in a studio, build a reading series, make a small press, post directly into the world, or write privately for thirty years before anyone knows what has been made. None of these positions guarantees artistic value. Craft, vision, discipline, intelligence, necessity, and form still matter. But the field should allow artists to work as artists before they have been certified by the systems that later claim to recognize them.

No single room contains the art. The work is in the tapestry. And the art itself is language: sacred, damaged, inherited, contested, sung, weaponized, prayed through, broken open, and remade. To treat poetry seriously is to treat it as art made from that material, not as a credential, a position, a career sequence, or a proof of institutional belonging. The poem has always belonged to more than one room. But if poetry were to have a room, it would have a big table in the middle of it, and on that table would be every kind and form of poetry, known and unknown, laid out for everyone.

About the Author: KC Clarke is the author of *Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate* and *The Groaning Book: A Poetics*, and of *Wolves and Flax: The Prior Family in the Cuyahoga Valley Wilderness*. His professional life has included leadership in literary centers, museums, libraries, and nonprofit institutions, as well as editorial and creative direction for numerous books. He writes from within the civic and cultural infrastructure this essay describes.